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ABSTRACT

This monograph examines use of standardized tests in higher education, particularly the Scholastic Assessment Tests (SAT), as an issue of social justice and the public interest and in the context of national concerns over access, equity, and demands for accountability. The paper notes public interest in access and equity beginning with 1930s concepts of "democratic arithmetic," to the World War II era Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, and then the National Defense Education Act of 1958. In the postwar years, public interest focused on excellence in education and the concept of testing student aptitudes and abilities. In the late 1960s, concerns with social justice became paramount, and public expectations moved from concepts of equal educational opportunities, to expectations of equal educational outcomes, to fairness in educational access and societal benefits. Since the 1980s, interest has focused on assessment of educational outcomes, and critics have argued against the SAT as an assessment measure. The paper holds, however, that in addition to its usefulness as a general measure of intellectual/academic competence, the SAT has many uses in academic decision making. But more importantly, the debate about the validity and usefulness of the SAT has contributed substantially to the clarification of public policies concerning access and equity. (Contains 17 references.) (CH)

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# SOCIAL JUSTICE, THE PUBLIC INTEREST AND THE SCHOLASTIC APTITUDE TEST (SAT)

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This paper was originally written in 1990 for the International Association for Educational Assessment conference held in Maastricht, The Netherlands, and published in 1991 as one of the contributed papers dealing with "Issues in Public Examinations."

In reprinting the paper nine years later, the only changes deemed necessary are: (1) a footnote reminding readers that the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is now known as the Scholastic Assessment Test, and (2) in the title by spelling out SAT as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, so that colleagues do not think that I am pouring "old wine into new bottles."

To the contrary, the testing controversies of the past require no new bottles because the issues of social justice, the public interest, and college admissions have not been resolved. If I were writing this paper for the first time in 1999, it would be as relevant today as it was nine years ago.

*Cameron Fincher*
*November 2, 1999*

Reprinted from Anton J.M. Luijten (Ed.) *Issues in Public Examinations: Proceedings of the 1990 IAEA Conference*. Utrecht: Uitgeverij Lemma B.V., 1991.

# Social Justice, the Public Interest and the SAT

CAMERON FINCHER

The uses and consequences of standardized tests in the United States continue to be a minor part of more significant issues concerning social justice and the public interest in higher education. As the best known and most widely used standardized test of academic ability, the Scholastic Aptitude Test[1] (SAT) is the frequent target of critics who believe that all standardized tests impede access and equity for students who are socially, economically, and educationally disadvantaged. Ignored in most of these criticisms is the valuable information that the SAT provides about the verbal and mathematical abilities of students completing secondary education and entering U.S. colleges and universities. In many respects the SAT is a major source of information concerning the ability and preparation of college students, the quality of secondary education, and the extension of educational opportunity to minorities in a pluralistic society. Other admission tests, such as the ACT, also contribute significant and valuable information, but the SAT is more frequently discussed in matters of national or public policy. The SAT thus is much closer to being, in effect, a national or public examination for students leaving secondary schools and entering institutions of higher education.

During the 1980s criticisms of standardized tests were frequently involved in the assessment of educational outcomes. Assessment was widely advocated for purposes of accountability and accreditation, and different forms and methods of assessing (as opposed to testing) student performance were part of the public demands placed upon schools and colleges. Criticisms of the SAT were particularly confused. Declining SAT scores were interpreted as evidence of the SAT's irrelevance to educational decisions, and variations in predictive validity coefficients were interpreted as proof of the SAT's

technological obsolescence. Changes in the SAT's content were recommended by the SAT's more friendly critics, while complete abolishment was advocated by those who saw no merits whatsoever in either national testing agencies or their standardized products.

This paper reviews the continuing national concern over access-and-equity issues in U.S. higher education and the public demands for accountability that stem from the declining quality of public education. The continuing interplay between a national quest for social justice as reflected in educational opportunities and outcomes and the public's interest in assessment as a means of accountability is a fascinating example of conflict in national character and temperament. Whatever the American national character, it has often been depicted as "quite willing to enjoy the best of all possible worlds."

## The Public Interest in Access and Equity

American notions of equity stem from a long standing concern with proportionate sharing. Regions, states, counties, and cities in the U.S. have often based their public expectations on concepts of "democratic arithmetic." If 2.6 percent of the nation's population resides within the State of Georgia, then Georgians are entitled to 2.6 percent of the nation's many benefits, advantages, and amenities. Such reasoning was quite pronounced in regional studies of the southern states during the 1930s and in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Constituting 11.7 percent of the nation's population, black citizens understandably believe that they are entitled to 11.7 percent of the rights and privileges in which societal distribution is influenced by public policy.

As other minority groups became aware of their proportionate share of societal benefits and advantages, more frequent references were made to distributive justice—and institutions of higher education were increasingly perceived as the means by which such national objectives were attained. In much the same manner that national security and prestige had dictated federal aid to education in the National Defense

Education Act of 1958, a national concern with equal opportunities shaped federal legislation in the 1960s. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1964, the Higher Education Act of 1965, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were instruments of public policy that extended societal privileges, benefits, and advantages to previously excluded minorities.

For institutions of higher education the societal extension of educational benefits and advantages can be seen as beginning in WWII with the enactment of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. Further extension is seen in the work of President Harry S. Truman's Commission on Higher Education (*1948*). Explicit in the commission's report is the belief that public education should be accessible and should carry the individual as far as his or her "native capacities" would permit. At least one-half (49%) of the American people were capable of benefitting from fourteen years of formal schooling and at least one-third (32%) were capable of completing programs of advanced liberal or professional education. The principal means by which such opportunities could be extended was two-year community or junior colleges that would provide a good mixture of general education with technical education. Precedents for such statements of faith in education can be seen in the Land-Grant College Act of 1862, in the development of American state universities (especially midwestern universities), and in the progressive movement of the early 1900s.

In the 1950s questions of access (to higher education) became questions of national purpose and policy in many nations (*Bowles, 1963*). Secondary schools were part of an extended "selection process" for institutions of higher education that were essential to national needs and objectives. The admissions process of selective colleges and universities became an intricate series of choices and decisions for individuals and institutions. In a publication recently reissued by the College Board, B. Alden Thresher (*1966/1989*) underscores the public's interest in a more effective system of college admissions. "Given the present assortment of 2,000 colleges,

universities, and junior colleges," he wrote, "what is the optimum way of distributing students among them, taking the long-run public interest as the criterion?" (*p. 83*). Thresher was aware of the social and economic forces affecting public demands and expectations in higher education. As a result, he was dubious that either selective admissions or competitive recruiting would serve societal purposes well because students, institutions, and society have different objectives and expectations.

In the late 1950s and the early 1960s, as college enrollments expanded, selective admissions was momentarily regarded as a solution to limited facilities, faculties, and finances. The College Board took the lead in addressing the policy issues involved in limiting enrollments to accommodate institutional resources. Annual symposia, research conferences, professional journals, and the popular press demonstrated a remarkable consensus in their discussions of "an impending tidal wave" of students and the nation's needs for campus facilities and classroom instructors.

## The Public Interest in Excellence

The individualistic features of the American national character have always included the expectation that individuals should excel. The discovery and development of talent was a particularly appealing aspect of higher education in its post-WWII years, and as school and college enrollments benefitted from a rapidly increasing birthrate, the sifting and sorting of potential talent was a societal responsibility that colleges and universities managed well until overwhelmed in the late 1960s. Jeffersonian notions of a "natural aristocracy of virtue and talent" were quite compatible with the nation's faith in education, and the testing of student aptitudes, abilities, and interests was in keeping with the public interest. John Gardner's (*1961*) book on excellence was read as both a national and a personal challenge. Individual differences in athletics, music, art, and drama were widely recognized as natural talents that could be identified early and developed further. Creativity and ingenuity in science and other intellectual

disciplines were increasingly recognized as special talents that should be discovered and encouraged. An emerging concept of developed abilities (such as those measured by the SAT) promised to set aside the irreconcilable differences of hereditarian and environmentalistic doctrines, and serious efforts were made to measure educational progress as a rational and developmental sequence in intellectual and/or academic competence. The optimism of that day was short-lived.

### Social Justice As Access and Equity

In the late 1960s national thought and discussion were suddenly (and tragically) concerned with social justice. On college campuses student protests and faculty dissent produced an educational climate in which neither administrators, faculty, nor students could discuss access, equity, and excellence as complementary concepts without resorting to contradiction. In their quest for excellence colleges and universities were regarded by social critics as serving the screening and credentialing needs of society, business corporations, and government agencies. Excellence became a code word for elitism and for the exclusion of minorities, women, and other non-traditional but deserving students.

In their quest for equality of educational opportunity, schools and colleges witnessed a drastic shift from educational inputs to educational outcomes. Unwisely writing into the Civil Rights Act of 1964 a survey of equal educational opportunity, the U.S. Congress created a demand for instant results that schools and colleges could not supply. In their hurry to meet a congressional mandate, the survey researchers were entrapped by their methodological preferences and concluded, for the most part, that further federal funding was a waste of public resources. Instead of surveying the "availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin," the researchers analyzed the determinants of educational achievement, as measured by tests of verbal ability. The major conclusion, as reported in the news media and as heard by too many receptive ears, was that home, family, and community were more important to

student learning than school facilities, teachers, classmates, and textbooks. Re-analyses and reinterpretations eventually clarified the confusions of the massive data collected, but not before irrevocable damage had been done in the world of public opinion and public expectations.

In 1973 the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education identified "the enlargement of educational justice for the post-secondary age group" as one of five main purposes of higher education. Following the education of individual students (purpose #1) and advancing human capabilities in society (#2), the Carnegie Commission's version of social justice was listed as the third most important function of American colleges and universities. As purpose (#3), educational justice was ranked higher than pure learning (#4) and the evaluation of society for self-renewal (#5). In their general thrust and overall effect, the recommendations of the Carnegie Commission were quite compatible with other public attitudes, beliefs, and values of the day.

In retrospect the emergence of equity as a dominant feature in public notions of social justice can be viewed as a poorly articulated progression from (a) public expectations of "equal educational opportunities" to (b) strident demands for "equal educational outcomes." From there, public thought and discussion turned to (c) concepts of "equity" in educational opportunities and outcomes and eventually to (d) more realistic concepts of equity as "fairness" in educational access, placement, instruction, evaluation, progression, graduation, and societal benefits or advantages. Concepts of equity as fairness are more in keeping with current concepts of cultural pluralism and give better promise to the future solution of educational problems. Unfortunately, the roadside is still cluttered with the debris of sociological and econometric notions of distributive effects that replaced a constructive "psychology of individual differences" with a militant "sociology of groups" (*See Jencks, et al., 1979 as one example*). In the process many schools and colleges found that they could not serve as instruments of worthy public policies without becoming political playgrounds.

## The Public Interest in Assessment

An increasing interest in the assessment of educational outcomes was clearly evident in the 1980s. National commissions and public leaders were apparently convinced that institutions of higher education could not be accountable without better evidence of congruence between institutional purposes and institutional effectiveness. Given the nation's previous reliance on testing, measurement, and evaluation, it is not surprising that the assessment of student outcomes should be widely advocated. Despite the inordinate concern with distributive effect in sociological and economic studies of occupational placement, starting salaries, lifetime earnings, socioeconomic status, and professional prestige, many studies were sensitive to the individual abilities of students and graduates as they climbed national career ladders. One of the more thorough studies (*Sewell and Hauser, 1975*) was explicit in its judgment of the importance of individual abilities: "However sophisticated our notions about social origins, it is not possible to give an accounting of the distribution of education, occupation, and income in the United States that excludes individual achievement and ability" (*p. 184*).

The "assessment movement" of the 1980s is a function of the changing climate of public opinion in which institutions of higher education find themselves. A quarter-century of declining test scores, the necessity of teaching basic skills of literacy to thousands of college freshmen, and intense dissatisfaction with the general academic competencies of a large proportion of college students—plus embarrassing criticisms of the literacy of college graduates enrolled in professional or graduate programs—have convinced many public leaders and policy makers that outcomes assessment is necessary to ensure institutional and program effectiveness and accountability to societal benefactors and sponsors.

Assessment concepts and methods, as currently propagated in the U.S., have been influenced by the minimal competency testing movement of the 1970s, the futile debates concerning criterion-referenced and norms-referenced testing, and the nation's apparent love-hate relation with multiple-choice,

mechanically scored, computer-processed tests such as the SAT. The U.S. news media—unable to accept the SAT as an empirically developed measure of verbal and mathematical ability and refusing to view standardized testing as a necessary technological innovation in an era of mass education—continues to give headlines to any and all studies that hint at Achilleian heels. Thus, they remain convinced that new and wondrous methods of assessing educational outcomes are available if *only* schools and colleges could be forced (by public opinion?) to use them. Interesting methods of assessment are in the making—but genuine, substantive assessment of general (and meaningful) educational outcomes is unlikely until national testing agencies supply "an assessment market" with instruments and methods that will have the practicality, credibility, and fairness of traditional and/or empirically validated tests such as the SAT and ACT.

The assessment uses of the SAT are best demonstrated by the valuable information which the SAT (and similar tests) provides. No other source produces as much relevant information about student abilities and achievement, and no other national organizations serve the public interest in the same way that the College Board, Educational Testing Service, and the American College Testing Program do. Critics of the SAT seldom recognize that the intellectual development of individuals is still an essential purpose and function of higher education. Intellectual competence is still an expected outcome of a college education, and the SAT (with such tests as the GRE, LSAT, MCAT, etc.) is still the best measure we have of the intellectual/academic competencies needed in most fields of advanced, specialized, professional study. The verbal and mathematical abilities tapped by the SAT are still the best (general) indication of individual capabilities in the worlds of education and work. And intellectual ability is still the best generalized measure of individual achievement. No one doubts individual differences in athletics, music, and art but many social critics deny individual (and group) differences in intellectual development.

In addition to information about the abilities and achievements of individuals, the SAT provides highly relevant information about the distribution of student abilities among institutions and programs of higher education. Within statewide systems of public higher education, the distribution of students among institutions and programs is particularly relevant to many questions of public policy. In the University System of Georgia, for example, the distribution of SAT scores among institutions lends credence to policy decisions that placed public institutions within commuting distance of the great majority (95%) of the State's population. Also implied by such distribution are the beneficial effects of individual choices and institutional decisions in the admission of high school graduates to the State's public colleges and universities (*Fincher, 1986a*).

The assessment uses and implications of the SAT may be summarized in the following manner: as a standardized test of academic ability, the SAT is, in many ways, a measure of basic academic competencies that are used extensively in undergraduate, graduate, and professional education. To no small extent, the test reflects the importance of vocabulary, reading comprehension, and mathematical reasoning in many different phases of conceptual learning. In addition to its usefulness as a general measure of intellectual/academic competence, the SAT has many advisement, counseling, sectioning, placement uses in academic decision making. Also relevant are the SAT's many uses in institutional research, planning, development, and evaluation (*Fincher, 1986a*).

The SAT, perhaps more than any other nationally administered test, has contributed substantially to the clarification of public policies concerning access and equity. The policy issues concerning standardized tests, group differences, and assessment alternatives to traditional testing concepts involved, in many ways, data and information derived from the SAT or similar tests (*Fincher, 1977; 1979*). For such reasons, the SAT, similar tests, or their modified versions should be used much more extensively in the assessment of educational outcomes—not less!

## Access, Equity, and Assessment

The assessment of educational outcomes is a search for competence—not excellence! U.S. governors and other public officials demand assurances that high school graduates can read and write well enough to become responsible employees, voters, and taxpayers. Social justice requires that educational opportunities be accessible and that educational outcomes be equitable. The public interest requires better secondary preparation to ensure basic academic competencies that will permit high school graduates to take better advantage of postsecondary opportunities. Thus, it all suggests a remarkable convergence on one form or another of assessment.

In the assessment of educational outcomes individual differences will continue to be the major source of variance. Neither institutional or program characteristics, nor instructional facilities and methods will account for measured or assessed outcomes as well as the intellectual/academic development of individual students. The assessment of educational outcomes thus cannot be statistically significant, educationally meaningful, or publicly creditable without consideration of individual differences in academic or learning ability.

Clearly it is in the public interest to assess individual differences in intellectual/academic competencies. It is also clear that social justice is best served in a society where individual talents, abilities, and achievements are assessed in a fair and creditable manner. Given systematic, objective, valid, reliable, and fair assessments of educational outcomes—individuals and institutions in higher education should be the beneficiaries. Assessed outcomes should serve the public interest in accountability and accreditation, as well as institutional interests in the improvement of undergraduate education. The assessment of individual competencies should serve social justice by contributing more substantially to self-understanding, academic and career planning, and personal management.

The assessment movement of the 1980s, as currently directed and supported, is without evidence that it can serve the larger purposes of access and equity in higher education. Social and economic forces (with their misplaced emphasis

on distributive effect) continue to dominate educational thought and discussion; too many critics are obsessed with the trivialities of group differences in assessed outcomes; and too many advocates of assessment would be satisfied with simplistic before-and-after differences if they could be displayed positively in the news media. Should public opinion leaders and policymakers acquiesce to such notions of access, equity, and assessment, the public interest will not be served.

In the 1960s B. Alden Thresher wrote about "the range of social forces that caused many youngsters of high ability to shun higher education" (*p.11*). In the 1990s we should study more closely the social and cultural forces that are barriers to access and achievement in a society with 3,500 institutions of postsecondary and higher education. We need to know more about the basic academic competencies of the nation's twelve million college students and why so many of them have not benefitted more from a quarter-century of "equal educational opportunity."

## Endnote

[1]The Scholastic Aptitude Test was renamed the Scholastic Assessment Test in Spring 1994.

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